

Y2000 Global Conference on Buddhism: in the Face of the Third Millennium

Euthanasia

A study in relation to original Theravada Buddhist thinking.

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Prologue

The religious, moral and social correctness of Euthanasia and its justifiability became a subject of serious inquiry and judgement, at least with us, only after the death of Mr. Robert [Bob] Dent of Darwin in Australia a few months ago. The newspaper THE AGE of Melbourne, in its story of the death of Bob Dent, made out that he had derived from Buddhism a great deal of inspiration in his tormented life as a cancer patient. This report immediately refreshed my memories of having met the late Mr. Bob Dent as far back as the early months of 1994 in Darwin itself. He visited us in the Buddhist Vihara of Darwin, told us of his recovery from a cancer which his doctors had diagnosed he was suffering from. He insisted that he achieved it through the Indian Buddhist meditation techniques. He appeared to be thoroughly reassured and in high spirits. He did not think there were even lingering traces of cancer within him. Apparently his

cancer was totally submerged and sent underground.

But the story of the Northern Territories Euthanasia Bill seems to have continued unabated over the years. If my memory is correct, I recollect reading in a Sydney newspaper in March or April 1995, during my second visit to Australia the following year, a comment that Buddhist teachings [certainly not of the Theravada tradition] make allowances for acts of suicide. It was probably a provincial version from a sectarian tradition. At that time we took it for no more than a passing comment.

Assuming that Bob Dent was by then completely cured of his cancer, I had no reason to suspect any impact of this line of thinking on him. But his choice of legalised voluntary Euthanasia in 1996 as a solution to the lamentable situation into which he had finally slipped makes me now think different. Hence this endeavour to clarify the Buddhist position, primarily from the Theravada religious angle. These situations of taking or making life-involving decisions, we believe, cannot be totally divorced from one's regular philosophy of life which may be derived through one's religious beliefs or from anywhere else. But on the continuity of a philosophy of life, in spite of the complexity of life in the world today, we insist. I would also attempt to make a few observations on the moral and social impacts of the issue of suicide and Euthanasia on the human community at large. As to who makes these judgements to terminate life, [over whom, in what contexts and on what basis] would continue to be relevant questions.

Euthanasia

Preliminary observations

In discussing the issue of Euthanasia we are essentially concerned with the death of human beings. At a very down to earth level, death may be defined as

termination or cessation of life. It can come about through a number of causes. Failure of life-sustaining forces at any point of time in life brings about what we term death through natural causes. Here no agency of persons or processes is involved.

As a second category we can think of death caused through accidents. This would clearly be sudden termination of life while full capacity to live lies with a person. In such cases the person who dies would have had no apprehension of death until that fatal moment. Nor would he have even vaguely anticipated it. Neither is there the necessity of personal involvement of any external agency. It is no more than a violent termination of life-sustaining factors or faculties. It becomes an involuntary process efficiently put through. The persons responsible for the accident are only peripherally connected. Brain-death could be a sub-category within both these groups. But precise determination of the reality of brain-death deserves to be under-taken as a separate study.

Further to these we have death of persons through killing: suicide and murder or culpable homicide not amounting to murder. Termination of life or bringing about death, whether by oneself or by another, is undeniably killing of one sort or another. The intensity of the offence or crime, as under serious provocation or in self-defence, may be judged differently. A trial judge presiding over an unaccomplished act of suicide would probably have many legal tools which he could dextrously handle in such a situation. In any normal case of suicide, without insanity and such other factors intervening, Buddhist teachings would view it as an act of destruction of life, without any differentiation, even though one would try to claim that particular life involved as one's own. Circumstances leading to the act of suicide may entitle one to plead in mitigation on behalf of the offender. Nevertheless, the crime would be in the category of destruction of life, and destruction of human life would rank a very gross offence with serious consequences. Our study therefore would concern itself with suicide and euthanasia only.

As we attempt to view the question of suicide from the Buddhist point of view, the greater part of relevant evidence comes to us from Buddhist monastic history. A very small number of suicides, of a mere three or so [Godhika at S.I.120f. & K.S.I.149f. Vakkali at S.III. 119f & K.S.III. 101-106. Channa at S. IV. 55f & K.S. IV. 30-33]. A complete sutta on Advice to Channa or Channovāda occurs at M.III. 263-6]. A monk by the name of Godhika who was strenuously struggling for liberation was unsuccessful in every attempt he made, up to a sixth. He is said to have achieved partial release from time to time, *sāmayikaṃ cetovimuttim*, and then fallen off from that state repeatedly up to a sixth time. He reached it again for the seventh time. But faced with an unbearable sense of frustration, i.e. of possible collapse again, he is said to have reached for his razor and slashed his throat. [S. I. 120 f. PTS / S. I. 220. BJTS].

And he, abiding in zealous, ardent and strenuous study, experienced temporary emancipation of mind, and fell away therefrom. And this befell him a second, and yet a third time, yea even six times. [SN.I.120 f.] Then he thought: Up to six times have I fallen away from temporary emancipation of mind. What if I were now to use the knife? ' [K.S. I. 150]

The important thing to note is that Godhika did commit suicide while he was in a state of emancipation, temporary though, at the seventh time. He did not do it while he had lost it after the sixth time. The Buddha apparently was aware of this. He is said to have summed up the situation in the following words.

Ay, thus the strong in mind do go to work.
 No longing have they after living on,
 Craving and root of craving tearing out,
 Hath Godhika passed utterly away.

[K.S. I. 151]

At this very moment in Godhika's life, the cumulative effect of his successful repeated spiritual endeavours apparently converged with this suicidal termination

of his life. Since his physical death was brought about while he was still in his temporary emancipation, it is said that there was none left to pay, in a life after, the penalty for this undoubtedly misjudged action [The venerable Sariputta prevails upon the venerable Channa to refrain from doing such a thing. See K.S. IV. 31]. That Godhika had ended his possibility of rebirth, i.e. wound up his journeying in the life process of *samsāra* is implied in the Buddha's words 'root of craving tearing out: *samūlaṃ taṇhaṃ abbuyha*'. It is also said that 'He harboured no yearning for life: *nāvakaṅkhanti jīvitam*.'

In the other two incidents of Vakkali and Channa, both are victims of severe and painful afflictions. Even Godhika's falling off from his emancipation is attributed to a physical deterioration.

On hearing the words of venerable Channa pertaining to his contemplated suicide, venerable Sariputta prevailed upon him not to do such a thing. He promised to attend on him looking after all his needs.

But the venerable Channa turns down all these offers, assuring that all these are available to him. But adds further that he has himself attended on the Master for long lengths of time, and that with great pleasure and not displeasure. That being the proper thing for a disciple to do, he adds that his suicide should be looked upon as being blameless. [SN. IV. 57 PTS / SN. IV. 128 BJTS]. The Buddha is seen to accept it.

Continuing this persuasive dialogue, the venerable Sariputta enables the venerable Channa to point out and convincingly admit that in none of the six cognitive processes in our phenomenon of life could one entertain the idea of a self or a derivative of a self. The venerable Channa categorically says: ' Seeing ceasing to be [*nirodham*], comprehending ceasing to be, friend Sariputta, do I so regard them.' [Ibid. 59 / 130]. Literally, this is to alert that rebirth is ended and that *samsāra* is transcended. That is all that a Buddhist disciple is endeavouring to achieve.

At the end of this very profound deliberation, however, the venerable Channa did end up his life with the knife. He did commit suicide. The venerable Sariputta hastens to question the Buddha about it.

Lord, the venerable Channa has used the knife. What is his rebirth? What is his attainment? And the Buddha explains. Was it not face to face with you, Sariputta, that the brother Channa declared that no blame attached to him? With conviction, the Buddha appears to add further. Nevertheless, Sariputta, I am not one to reproach him, saying ' He is to blame.' For who so, Sariputta lays down one body and takes up another body, of him I say ' He is to blame.' But it is not so with the brother Channa. Without reproach was the knife used by the brother Channa. So should you maintain, Sariputta. [Ibid. 33]. [SN. IV. 59f. PTS / SN. IV. 133. BJTS.]

Both these cases pertain to Buddhist disciples of long standing in the Order whose religious earnestness and spiritual maturity are unquestionable. They were persons with deep-seated convictions. The question of physical bodily pain is here analytically examined in the truly Buddhist way, with a great deal of philosophic realism. The role of the mind which recognises and reports pain, to the utter consternation of the recipient, is convincingly reduced to a bundle of psychic processes which are within the control of the psyche or the mental self.

All these three incidents of Godhika, Vakkali and Channa clearly show that the persons here concerned had all gone beyond the stage of 'entertaining any longing for life or continuing the life process': *nāvakaṅkhanti jīvitaṃ*. This total detachment or eradication of craving [*samūlaṃ taṇhaṃ abbuyha*] also implied that they were not going to be reborn. In such a situation their act of suicide would be one which is incapable of fruition or bearing fruit. Their behaviour in this context would be in the same category like the criminal acts of murder of Angulimāla who committed them prior to his attainment of final liberation. They would in fact, we believe, fall in the category of 'acts only' [*kammaṃ ahoṣ*] which 'bear no fruit' [*na vipāko*].

Our assessment of the act of suicide in these cases is from a highly sophisticated religious angle. It applies only to the totally accomplished disciples, namely *arahants*. This would not be applicable to the lower grades of monks. Much less in the case of ordinary laymen.

Suicide and those within the cycle of *samsāra*.

Outside this frame, the Buddhist has to view terminating of life in suicide, no matter under what circumstances, as amounting to destruction of human life. Many mitigating factors could possibly be put forward and the offence could be sub-graded to man-slaughter, culpable homicide not amounting to murder etc. In any case, destruction being by oneself, what is destroyed is believed to be one's own life. To the Buddhist, this position is untenable. What is destroyed is life, whether claimed as one's own or differentiated as that of another. In Buddhism, the very first precept of admonition for good living [i.e. *sīla*] is the abstinence from destruction of life [*pāṇātipātā veramaṇī*]. This applies to life of all grades, both human and animal [*sabba-pāṇa-bhūta-hitānukampī*]. And the precept is equally binding on both monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen.

In the ethical injunctions of Buddhism for good living both for the monk and the layman, referred to above, the precepts of *sīla* have no legal validity. They are left to the judgement and good sense of those who opt to follow them [*sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi*]. However, within the monastic order of monks and nuns, they are rephrased and elevated to the status of legal enactments, with accompanying penalties and punishments. In the corpus of monastic laws, a distinction is even made between the destruction of human and animal life. In the monastic rules of Vinaya discipline, destruction of human life [*manussa-viggaha*] is placed in the first category of the four major offenses or Pārājjikā [= defeat], entailing total destruction of one's monastic status. Legally, destruction of animal life by monks and nuns comes in a category of lesser offence known as Pācittiya [Vin, IV, p.124. Pāc. LXI].

Now as for instances of suicide or the decision to terminate one's life, we notice we are driven to collect our data from monastic history. Extreme despair in the face of spiritual failure is indicated as a prompting for the choice of suicide. A monk named Sappadāsa [Theragāthā v. 407] and a nun named Sīhā [Therīgāthā v. 80], both say, in a more or less relative assessment, that it would be better to terminate their lives, either with a weapon or by hanging themselves rather than return to the lay-life which they had already rejected. Such a return, they would logically argue, tantamounts to the death of their spiritual life. It is worded exactly so in the text where it says 'a disciple's return to lay-life tantamounts to death' [*Maraṇañhetam bhikkhave ariyassa vinaye yo sikkham paccakkhāya hīnāyāvattati. Maraṇamattañhetam bhikkhave dukkham yadidaṃ aññataram saṅkiliṭṭham āpattiṃ āpajjati yathārūpāya āpattiyā vuṭṭhānaṃ paññāyati.* Samyutta Nikaya II. p.271].

We look upon these situations as instances of the use of a severe yardstick of measurement by honest and serious disciples. They do so to boost up their sagging religious enthusiasm as well as to sharpen the dull edge of their spiritual tools. Some tend to take them as real incidents of suicide. In any case we are certain that these persons did not end up in suicide. Both these are only attempts at suicide. Both persons concerned lived to tell the story of their success. They triumphed and attained the goal of their religious quest. Sīhā says that at that moment of contemplated suicide by hanging she gained the release of mind [*Pakkipiṃ pāsaṃ gīvāyaṃ atha cittaṃ vimucci me.* Thig. v. 80]. Sappadāsa is equally clear in his assertion that as he attempted to slash an artery with a razor he gained the release of his mind [*Parinīto khuro āsi dhamaniṃ chettum attano. Tato cittaṃ vimucci me.* Thag. v. 407].

Let us now come to the realities of the world we live in and consider the situations in which euthanasia is sought and euthanasia is carried out. The following categories may be witnessed, possibly with a few others to come. One has to reckon with the complexities of the problem, whether one agrees with

them, endorses them or not. We may present them as follows.

Un-legalised euthanasia carried out by medical practitioners on patients whom they believe are terminally ill and whom they deem would better be dead than alive.

These may be at the request of the patient, with consent or suggestion, or without consent.

On request by persons closely related to the patient [but other than the patient himself], made out to be on grounds of sympathy or compassion [about the reality or otherwise of which one can entertain considerable doubt]. It may also be expediency in the interests of those other than the patient [i.e. good riddance of what may be deemed a burden or unwanted source of trouble.]

On decisions taken by individuals or groups, not substantially related to the patient, but interested in the termination of the life of the patient for various other social and economic reasons [like cost to the family or the state].

Legalised voluntary euthanasia on request by the patient, made in a state of sanity or perfect mental health and good judgement. This may primarily be i. due to a desire to terminate an unbearable state of pain to the patient or ii. in the interests of those on whom the patient is dependent economically, emotionally etc.

Of the above considerations, legalised voluntary euthanasia [No.5] seems to be the only one on behalf of which the Buddhists may claim any legitimacy. Here alone the patient claims full responsibility for the termination of his life. It is equally well ascertained that the patient does it with a full awareness of what he is doing. As far as basic Buddhist teachings of the Theravada are concerned this has to be viewed as an error of judgement. This is certainly in violation of the pledge by every Buddhist to abstain from destruction of life. For lay persons it remains at the level of an ethical injunction, no more than a precept [*pāṇātipātā*

vramañī sikkhāpadaṃ], without any legal implications or punishments involved. But it is at the same time a socio-ethical wrong-doing of the highest order.

At the level of the full-fledged monk, considerations regarding destruction of human life, whether one's own or that of another, acquire legal status with the necessary provision for prosecution and punishment. It involves a disciplinary rule of the highest grade [Pārājikā No.3], requiring total expulsion from monastic life. In the case of voluntary euthanasia, legalised or otherwise, the doctor's share lies only in setting up the involuntary process of execution of getting the lethal dose into the patient's body at his request. In compliance with a patient's request, the doctor is only 'aiding and abetting' a patient who, for whatever reason, chooses to terminate his life. As far as a monk is concerned, this is as serious an offence as murder or man slaughter. [Note the details of Pārājikā No.3 given above.].

From the Buddhist point of view, one would here question the correctness of the patient's decision. It is to be remembered that except in the case of the liberated ones, i.e. those in Nirvana who are not destined to be born again, death begets life anew for everyone. Death does not terminate life, or more precisely the life process. Hence it cannot terminate pain and unhappiness. They are linked up with new life wherever it begins. Suicide or destruction of life being viewed as an evil act in itself, such a termination of life to terminate pain and suffering at this end would entail payment for it hereafter with interest compounded to it. Hence a sufferer's desire to terminate pain in this life through suicide has to be unequivocally declared an error of judgement. As for the desire to relieve the burden on others, it would as much be a serious error of judgement. Such sympathy would be no more than misguided charity. Suicide would show itself up as an attempt to cheat pain in life, forgetting the possibility of its recurrence in a life after. Attempts to dodge threatening instances of shame and insults, to erase off memories of defeat and frustration, seem to drive both men and women, young and old, to extremely lamentable acts of suicide. Except

in very special cases of hopeful life restoration, resorting to life-supporting systems like a respirator to prolong life would appear to be a futile attempt to cheat death.

All other attempts, under the dignified name of euthanasia, to terminate human life by persons other than the patient himself, on i. compassionate grounds of pain relieving, ii. bringing about dignified dying for those abandoned as terminally ill, or iii. clearing spots of social eyesore by ridding society of its unwanted members who are judged 'not fit to live' would be clear reflections of egoistic high-handedness, both individual and collective, justified in the name of sympathetic and humane considerations as well as veiled notions of social grooming. The possible unethical turns on these blind alleys are bound to be invariably unavoidable.

Epilogue

Let us now turn our attention to the impact of Euthanasia on society at large and the moral assessment of its possible abuse. It is now widely accepted that many in our circle of humans do reach stages in their lives when the unmanageable condition of their physical bodies, resulting from cases of terminal illness, drive them to choose death to relieve themselves of the pain suffered in those conditions. Under normal circumstances, the legal permission sought under legalised Euthanasia is to execute and carry out these requests. But there can be many instances where these are overstepped. Many requests can come from persons other than the patients themselves who seek riddance of unwanted persons in their midst, unwanted perhaps for many reasons which may lie in different areas like social, cultural and economic. We would consider some of these apparently well intended attempts as verging on man-slaughter or culpable homicide not amounting to murder. They are no less than acts of deliberate termination of human life, the justifiability of which under various circumstances we may attempt to concede, might be hotly debated. Equally weighty arguments, for and against, may spring from different levels of one's religious stand and

cultural development.

Another area of social intervention in the termination of another's life, for various understandable reasons which we need to consider here, lies in the withdrawal of a life-supporting system which had been hopefully introduced for the rescue of a human life through medication or surgery. But seeing the tragic ebb of chances of retrieval, people are often driven, sometimes more meaningfully, to withdraw such support. The relatively larger economic gains [through not incurring any more unproductive expenditure on life-supporting systems as well as through earlier-than-expected inheritance of assets and estates of such a dying person] often outweigh the concern for a very definitely fading out human life.

As Buddhists, we would view such situations as taking 'the bull by the horns'. In doing so, in putting patients of diverse sorts on life-supporting systems, particularly in view of their economic viability or otherwise, we would be indulging in an unwise and unwarranted undertaking. But once undertaken, we would have to decide and judge in favour of life. At most levels, attempts to delay death in the hope of rescuing and consolidating life amounts to no more than attempts to cheat death. Buddhists would have in many cases to accept such endeavours as both unacceptable and fruitless adventures.

A very specific area of challenge for the relative value of life comes in the decision to save the life of a pregnant mother in the face of danger to her life on account of her unborn child. The direct question to face is 'With what respect do we treat the foetal life of an unborn child?' It is now admitted in many parts of the world that the unborn child has a right to defend itself, i.e. save its life. It is a right with near-complete independence of the mother who carries the child. We would at the same time consider the mother to be compelled by what we could consider decent human ethics to respect this. These conservative evaluations uphold that a mother may even safeguard her child at the risk of her own life. We do understand that such concepts which had their origin in very ancient times are

therefore time wise and space wise well beyond notions like `unwanted children', and the loss of prestige [at least in certain quarters] of `unmarried mothers'. Here it would admittedly be difficult to invoke a religious law in favour of one or the other as it would in any case involve the destruction of life [of the mother or the child], of the bigger or the smaller, of the fully grown or not yet fully grown. Does the natural law of survival of the fitter come to our rescue here and save us of the embarrassment?

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Post Script N.B.

Subsequent research by the author has revealed that the Sri Lankan and Mien Mar tradition which pronounces that an act of suicide attempted by a monk [See under Parajika No. 3], results only in a *dukkaṭa* [i.e. a relatively very minor] offence to be a serious error of translation of the Pali: *Na ca bhikkhave attānaṃ pātetabbaṃ yo pāteyya āpatti dukkaṭassa*. The word *pātetabbaṃ* here only means `causes to fall or jumps off from'. It does not mean to kill, The Thai texts have what we consider to be the correct translation.